

Duxbury's Debt To Timothy Alden

By William Lord McKinney
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of the Duxbury Rural and His-
torical Society. -- Ed.)

Occasionally a visitor to the Historical Society asks the reason for the enduring fame of John Alden, as did a noted professor at Boston College recently. Often the questions concern the historicity of the legend of the courtship of John and Priscilla immortalized by Longfellow, while some even mention minor anachronisms in the glorious poem. Without doubt the story is one of the brightest elements in Duxbury's history.

SOURCE KNOWN

Now there is little doubt as to the source of the Longfellow narrative. It was taken from the writings of Timothy Alden, published by him when Longfellow was a little boy and probably written by Alden in Duxbury or Bridgewater long before the birth of Longfellow. Strange to relate, the writings and personality of Timothy Alden are little known in Duxbury, but it was he who preserved this gem of Pilgrim charm. Following is the story as printed on page 265 in volume 3 of his 1814 edition:

"In a very short time after the decease of Mrs. Standish, the captain was led to think, that, if he could obtain Miss Priscilla Mullins, a daughter of Mr. William Mullins, the breach in his family would be happily repaired. He, therefore, according to the custom of those times, sent to ask Mr. Mullins' permission to visit his daughter. John Alden, the messenger, went and faithfully communicated the wishes of the captain. The old gentleman did not object, as he might have done, on account of the recency

of Captain Standish's bereavement. He said it was perfectly agreeable to him, but the young lady must also be consulted. The damsel was then called into the room, and John Alden, who is said to have been a man of most excellent form with a fair and ruddy complexion, arose, and, in a very courteous and prepossessing manner, delivered his errand. Miss Mullins listened with respectful attention, and at last, after a considerable pause, fixing her eyes upon him, with an open and pleasant countenance, said, "prithee, John, why do you not speak for yourself?" He blushed and bowed and took his leave, but with a look, which indicated more than his diffidence would permit him otherwise to express. However, he soon renewed his visit, and it was not long before their nuptials were celebrated in ample form....What report he made to his constituent, after the first interview, tradition does not unfold; but it is said, how true the writer knows not, that the captain never forgave him to the day of his death."

For a few years, the subject of this article lived in Plymouth and then settled in Duxbury on a farm, which, it is a little remarkable, has remained in the possession of his descendants ever since and is one of the best in the town. He built his house on a rise of land near Eagle Tree Pond, where the ruins of his well are still to be seen.

Dr. Ernest Ashton Smith, Alden's biographer, says that Timothy was "burdened with a passion for making waste places productive." This was illustrated by the interest Alden took in preaching to the Indians in western New York and Pennsylvania where he visited the Senecas and Munsees, and converted the chieftain, "Cornplanter," to Christianity. When he asked the chieftain to explain just why he preferred Christianity to his native Indian faith, Cornplanter replied, "Your religion is in a book." In Alden's report to the

Missionary Society in Boston, he tells of watching the Indians use crude oil which seeped from rocks and was soaked in skins for various purposes, and makes the now amusing comment that the oil might be used for lighting city streets and if it could be "de-odorized" might have commercial possibilities.

Note that this was nearly a half century before Drake "discovered" oil in Pennsylvania.

Perhaps the Alden kin of those days were interested in oil. Roger Alden was there in 1795 as the agent for the Holland Land Company and active as a community leader. I happen to possess, in an old scrapbook compiled by the historian William Latham and given into my keeping, a valued map of the Old Colony Oil Company of that part of Pennsylvania where the Senecas lived. The director of the Oil City Museum, Dr. Benjamin, years ago requested a photographic copy which he features in the museum.

Perhaps men in Duxbury learned of the reports from Timothy and Roger Alden and formed the Old Colony Oil Company.

Thus far I have been unable to trace its history in the records of the American Antiquarian Society or elsewhere. Without question the company was the result of men in this area being eager to find in crude oil a substitute for whale oil. When Timothy Alden moved his family from New York to Meadville, Pa., the trip was a rugged adventure, which required some ten weeks, but the pioneers were stalwart sons of the Pilgrims.

Some 30 years ago I chanced to think that Duxbury might have some interesting data on Timothy Alden, but none was to be had.

Years ago I interviewed a noted descendant at Yale University, the chairman of the department of philosophy, who was of the opinion that Timothy was the "great scholar" of the Alden tradition; note this from one of the luminaries of Yale. We spoke of Timothy Alden having failed of election to the faculty at Harvard

as a professor of Oriental Languages about 1807, after having been supported for the position by William Bentley of Salem, famed orient linguist, often called upon by our government to translate credentials of ambassadors from the far east. We then visited the Yale archives and were shown Alden's letter saying his own son was to enter Yale. It was evident that the switch from Harvard to New Haven was occasioned by failure to gain the coveted post.

THE DIARY

William Bentley's 11-volume diary records his disgust at Alden's defeat in Cambridge and declares the one chosen to fill the post knows nothing of Oriental Literature. It seems likely that Bentley had heard Alden deliver his commencement oration at Harvard in Syriac, a feat never performed before or since, it is said. When Timothy founded Allegheny College in western Pennsylvania, Bentley willed his most valued library of foreign language literature and Biblical materials to Alden for his college, though Harvard, it was assumed, was to receive the great treasure.

Bentley had been invited by President Jefferson to take over the presidency of the University of Virginia, but he declined to leave the East Parish in Salem. Before founding Allegheny College Alden had published his famed "Epitaphs," after having served officially with the New York and Massachusetts Historical Societies and assisting Isaiah Thomas, later its president, in the organization of the American Antiquarian Society.

THE TRADITION

Now Timothy Alden, who enriched the literary atmosphere of Duxbury by his preservation of its most beautiful tradition, was in the fifth generation of Pilgrim stock from John and Priscilla. His father, the Rev. Timothy Alden of Yarmouth, served that parish for 59 years; in his latter years he was seen occasionally in

Boston, attired in small clothes, with knee and shoe buckles, a 3-cornered hat and antique wig. He was reverently referred to as the "last colonial."



TIMOTHY ALDEN
(Continued on Page 18)

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DUXBURY'S DEBT (Continued from Page 5)

My own interest in Timothy Alden is due to the fact that I took my college degree from Allegheny College, which was founded by him in 1815 and where its graduates felt honored in being called "sons of Timothy." Over 20 years ago I discovered this portrait of Timothy in the parish hall of the South Parish in Portsmouth, N.H. Fortunately I secured the portrait as a gift from the church to Allegheny College.

Alden at the age of eight was sent by his father to live with his uncle, Lt. Joshua Alden of Bridgewater, and to attend the Greek and Latin School of the Rev. John Shaw, then notable for having at one commencement in Cambridge furnished about one quarter of the men in the Harvard graduating class.

Timothy's uncle Joshua was a supervisor of the churchyard and "clerk of the mortuary" in the old parish there which I served for 30 years and I formed the opinion that Timothy's eight years of residence there had been partly responsible for his "Collection of American Epitaphs and Inscriptions with occasional notes." Dr. Ernest Ashton Smith, Alden's biographer, says it was probably inspired by his fondness for Gray's "Elegy written in a Country Churchyard."

The mortal remains of Philip De la Noye, founder of the Delano family in America and an original proprietor of Bridgewater, were finally laid to rest in this early churchyard, according to the opinion of William Wing, New Bedford's historian, although an earlier burial had been on a private estate. Some of the early epitaphs have been rather well publicized in modern novels.

THE PLAN

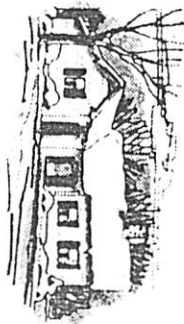
Joshua Alden, it seems, had planned to have Timothy settle on the ancestral estate with its flowing stream, fresh meadows and fertile acres, but Timothy was wont to follow the plow with a Latin text in one hand and to pause overmuch at the end of the furrow. The call of the college in Cambridge was in his blood, going back to the first quarter century of Harvard, so he followed also the steps of his father to Cam-

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bridge and forgot the soul and his under's entreaty.

The Alden house in Bridgewater repeated the charm of its Duxbury counterpart. Recently a Boston publisher printed a picture of the Duxbury house and called it the High St. House in Bridgewater. Architectural students conclude it was built about 1700, but it probably embodies some of the earlier habitation built by John and his son Joseph in the early 1640's before the area known as "Duxborough Plantation" was purchased from the chiefdom Ousa-Mequin (Yellow Feather) by Myles Standish, Samuel Nash and Constant Southworth in 1649. It is generally assumed that no settlers entered the territory before the purchase, but there is evidence of earlier arrivals.

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